

Life of Christ

Conflict With the Pharisees

I. The Basis of the Conflict

A. Christ and Grace vs. the Pharisees and the Law

Christ was the end of the law, its ultimate fulfillment (Romans 10:4). The law was never intended as a means of salvation, but as a means of condemnation (Romans 5:20). The law was meant to force men to cry out to God for real deliverance, deliverance which would come by grace.

B. Christ and the Internal vs. the Pharisees and the External

Christ spoke of an internal indicator of righteousness, not the external keeping of tradition and religious rules. This is clearly seen in the Sermon on the Mount.

- Murder is not actually the act of killing someone, but of hating them.
- Adultery is not the external act, but the internal thought.
- Swearing and oath breaking is not a matter of externally following the rules, but of internally being a person of integrity.
- Prayer is not a matter of external show, but of internal communion with God.
- Almsgiving is not meant to increase one's standing in front of others, but of meeting the needs of those who lack.
- Fasting is a result of internal turmoil over sin or some other spiritual need, not an external act to increase one's spiritual stature in the eyes of others.

C. Christ and Truth vs. the Pharisees and Tradition

Time and time again the Pharisees quoted tradition in order to accuse Christ of breaking the law. However, Christ correctly points out that the traditions of men are irrelevant, the truth of God is timeless.

II. Preparation For the Showdown

A. Conflict over the Sabbath - John 5:9-16

- One of the most significant areas of conflict with the Pharisees was over the Sabbath. The Pharisees had so encumbered the Sabbath with minor technicalities of what was and was not allowed that the Sabbath became a burden to men.
- On many occasions Christ confronted this when he healed on the Sabbath, ate on the Sabbath, and did other good deeds on the Sabbath.

- In fact, on this and several other occasions, it was Christ's perceived abuse of the Sabbath that caused the Pharisees to desire to kill Him.
- B. Conflict over the Sabbath when eating corn in the fields - Matthew 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 6:1-5
- Jewish law forbade threshing on the Sabbath, and since rubbing the ears of corn to obtain the kernels was considered threshing, Christ's actions were forbidden by Jewish tradition.
 - Christ's answer to this accusation is twofold. First He points out that on one occasion David was guilty of profaning the tabernacle when he ate the shewbread to avoid hunger and suffering. Secondly, the priests "work" on the Sabbath and are yet guiltless before God. The issue is not one of what a person does or does not do, but of honoring the Sabbath as God intended it to be honored.
- C. Conflict over the casting out of demons - Matthew 12:22-37, Mark 3:20-30
- One of the areas in which the Pharisees had major problems was that Christ, a man they considered to be a heretic, was able to easily cast demons out of people. Their explanation was that it was because Christ was in league with Baalzebul, the prince of demons.
 - Christ's response was a condemnation of the Pharisees in that He pointed out that if He cast them out by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom had arrived, if however, He did not, then by whom do the Jews cast out demons? Additionally, Satan would not cast out Satan because a house divided against itself cannot stand.
 - The issue of the unpardonable sin is raised in this passage. From the context it is clearly a dispensational sin, committed only during the time that Christ was performing His miracles. It was the act of contributing the works of Christ done by the power of the Holy Spirit to Satan.
- D. Conflict over the ministry of John the Baptist - Matthew 11:17-19, Luke 7:30-35
- Christ points out the ludicrous criticism of the Pharisees by showing that in spite of what He or John the Baptist did, they would find complaint. They despised John for his asceticism and Christ for His liberality.
 - The illustration of the children in the marketplace shows that the Pharisees would find fault no matter who God sent just like children who refuse to play the games because they want to do something else.
- E. Conflict over the clean and unclean - Matthew 15:1-20, Mark 7:1-23
- The Pharisees had prescribed a lengthy ritual that a pious person must observe prior to eating a meal. If this ritual was not observed then it was possible that the person would become defiled, or even worse, demon possessed.

- Christ blows away this tradition by indicating that nowhere in the law is this prescribed. However, the commandment to honor one's parents was being ignored by tradition. In other words, the Pharisees were careful to keep the tradition of the elders, but lax in keeping the commandments of God.
 - The Pharisees had come up with a system in which they could dedicate their possessions to God, thus releasing them of the obligation to use them for their parents. Later on, they could take control of their possessions for their own ends, but were legally bound in that they could not use them for their parents.
- F. Conflict over forgiveness and hypocrisy - John 8:1-11
- Hoping to force Christ to show His support for the severe punishment given to prostitutes, the Pharisees drag a woman in front of Him for condemnation. Instead of condemning her, Christ forgives her.
 - His pointed question to the crowd exposed their hypocrisy, "Whichever one of you is not guilty of *this* sin, let him cast the first stone." Thus Christ affirms the severity of the penalty, but demands that only those who are guiltless of the same crime be allowed to do the stoning.
- G. Conflict over Christ's deity - John 8
- This great confrontation culminates in Christ's statement, "before Abraham was, I am." This is a clear reference to the tetragrammaton YAHWEH of the Old Testament, God's name first given to Moses in Exodus 3.
 - It is interesting to follow the arguments through this chapter. The Pharisees constantly twisted Christ's statement to prove their righteousness and Christ's unrighteousness.
- H. Conflict over eating with unwashed hands - Luke 11:37-54
- This event is different that the one described in Matthew 15.
 - Interestingly, Christ's denunciation of the Pharisees in this passage mirrors the content of Matthew 23. This shows that many times Christ used the same material on several occasions.
- I. Conflict over healing the woman bent double on the Sabbath - Luke 13:10-17
- This incident points out that it is possible for Satan to cause disease. Christ clearly indicated that it was Satan who caused this woman's disease for eighteen years.
- J. Conflict over healing the man with dropsy on the Sabbath - Luke 14:1-6
- Again we see the callousness of the Pharisees in that they held their man-made traditions of the Sabbath over the good others performed on the Sabbath.
 - Note the hypocrisy of helping an animal on the Sabbath while ignoring the sufferings of men.

- K. Conflict over the love of money - Luke 16:14-18
- One of the ideas that the Pharisees had was that wealth was a sign of God's favor. This is brought out in Matthew 6, and in the teachings by the rabbis that it was possible to "buy" one's way into heaven by almsgiving.
- L. Conflict over Christ's authority - Matthew 21:23-27, Mark 11:27-33, Luke 20:2-8
- One of the major problems faced by the religious leaders was the source of Christ's authority. The religious leaders obtained their authority by quoting others, Christ spoke of Himself (Matthew 7:28-29). If the leaders could destroy the basis of Christ's authority, they could destroy His message.
 - Christ expertly sidesteps their ploy by asking them if John the Baptist was a prophet. If they said "yes", then Christ would reply "Why didn't you listen to him then?", and if they responded with "no", they would endanger themselves from the crowd who considered John the Baptist a great prophet. Because they did not answer Christ, He did not divulge the source of His authority to them.

III. Christ Answers the Critics - Matthew 22

In Matthew 22 we find Christ expertly answering the questions brought to Him by each of the major sects of the day. Apart from Christ, these sects constantly fought against each other, but their common enemy caused them to band together in order to discredit Him.

A. The Question of Taxes

- This question was put to Christ by the Herodians, a group of people loyal to Herod. It was meant to entrap Him by forcing Him to take sides with the government, thus alienating the people, or taking sides with the people, thus enabling them to accuse Him of sedition.
- The Jews were a fiercely independent people, abhorring the necessity of paying taxes to the Roman government. If there ever was a hot button with the crowds, it was this one.
- Christ's answer to "render to Ceasar the things that are Ceasar's and to God the things that are God's" shows that we are to pay taxes to Ceasar, but render to God the worship due Him.
- Paul affirms the necessity of paying taxes in Romans 13 in which Christians are enjoined to obey and support the government that God has established over them.

B. The Question of the Resurrection

- This second question was put forth by the Sadducees who denied the reality of the resurrection. It was meant to show the ludicrousness of a resurrection by asking whose wife a woman would be who was married to seven brothers.

- Christ's response was direct, "God is not the God of the dead but the living." Yes, there will be a resurrection, but current human relationships take on a different meaning in resurrection life.
- Christ's response no doubt overjoyed the Pharisees since they had tried in vain to prove the resurrection from the Pentateuch, the only books of the Old Testament accepted by the Sadducees. Christ's argument hinges on the use of the word "I am", not "I was." Verbal inspiration is a necessary doctrine.

C. The Question of the Greatest Commandment

- Having silenced the Herodians and Sadducees, Christ is now asked a question by the Pharisees. It was asked by a lawyer, one of the experts in the law.
- The question, "Which is the great commandment," was meant to get Jesus to bypass the law of Moses and insert one of His own. He did not do this, however, and distilled the essence of the entire law into two precepts, "Love the Lord with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as yourself."

D. The Question of Christ's Messiahship

- Having dealt with the questions by the religious and political leaders, Christ now asks them a question, "Whose Son is Christ?"
- Many cults deny the deity of Christ on the basis of it being illogical or a carryover from paganism. However, the deity of Christ is one of the foundational pillars of the Scriptures, one on which rests the eternal destiny of every human being.
- Christ confounds the Pharisees by asking them a simple question, "Whose Son is Christ?" to which they reply "David." It was well known from Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah would come through the line of David (see Psalm 89).
- The Pharisees did answer correctly, but then Christ confounds them by pointing out that David called the Messiah his Lord. If the Messiah is David's Son, then how is He also David's Lord.
- The answer of course is that Christ is God incarnate, born into the human race through the line of David. However, if one does not have the illumination of the Holy Spirit, then one cannot understand this truth. That was the problem of the Pharisees.
- This was the final question. After Christ shows them how utterly incompetent they were, they asked Him no more questions.

IV. A Description of False Spiritual Leaders - Matthew 23:1-7

Christ knew His time was short, and because of that it was necessary for Him to destroy the credibility of the false religious leaders so that the people would follow the true shepherds, Christ's disciples.

Christ's condemnation of the religious leaders took place in the temple, right in front of the very ones He was condemning.

- A. They lack Authority - Matthew 23:2
- The Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, the seat of honor in the Synagogues, but they are not qualified to do so. They assume authority which has not been given them.
- B. They lack Integrity - Matthew 23:3
- This is the sign of a hypocrite, one who demands things of others that they will not do themselves.
 - Christ affirms the authority of the law by saying that when the Pharisees teach the law, it is to be obeyed. However, do not act like the Pharisees because they do not do the things they preach to others.
- C. They lack Sympathy - Matthew 23:4
- The Pharisees are quick to bind heavy burdens on others, but refuse to lift those same burdens. Christ is talking about the burden of the law that the Pharisees put everyone under when they themselves made new laws so that they could avoid keeping the many they could not.
 - In our time many religious makes demands on their followers that the leaders cannot abide under. Although they may appear to outwardly be moral and upright people, inside they are evil and wicked.
- D. They lack Spirituality - Matthew 23:5
- The activities of the Pharisees were meant to draw attention to their supposed spirituality. Christ indicates that they made large phylacteries (leather boxes strapped to the hands or forehead which contained Scripture) in order to be easily seen by others. Additionally, they enlarged the borders of their garments to appear super-spiritual. God had given the Jews this as a sign of their separateness from others (Numbers 15:37-41), but the hypocritical Jews overdid this and made it something to be proud of.
- E. They lack Humility
- Finally, the false spiritual leaders of Christ's day lacked humility. They were always looking for the elevated offices and chief seats in order to be at the front of everyone's attention.
- V. A Description of True Spiritual Leaders - Matthew 23:8-12
- A. Humility - Matthew 23:8-10
- In contrast to false spiritual leaders, true spiritual leaders are to be marked by humility. The Pharisees had thought that they arrived spiritually, only to be told by Christ that they were on the wrong road. Those who are truly spiritual realize their dependence on God.

- Paul indicates that one of the marks of religious hypocrites is that they desire to be teachers of the law although they have no concept of what the law actually is (1 Timothy 1:3-8).
- B. Lowly Service
- In contrast to seeking the best positions, a true spiritual leader seeks lowly service. The organizational chart of Christ's kingdom is Him at the head, and everyone else at the same level below. Although various members of the body of Christ occupy different offices and perform different functions, underneath it all is a sense of service to others regardless of where or how that service is performed.
- VI. Christ Condemns the Religious Leaders - Matthew 23:13-36
- A. The religious leaders are condemned for excluding others from the Kingdom - Matthew 23:13
- Because of their dependence on their legal system and their insistence that others follow them, the Pharisees refuse to let others enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Not only do they not enter, they do not allow others to enter.
- B. The religious leaders are condemned for their greed - Matthew 23:14
- The Pharisees had created a neat system whereby they could legally assume control of the property of others while maintaining their image of righteousness. Christ illustrates this by using the example of the poorest of the victims of the Pharisees, the widows.
 - Christ also attacks the long prayers, something we find in the Sermon on the Mount.
- C. The religious leaders are condemned for their perverting of others - Matthew 23:15
- Christ condemns the Pharisees for taking a great deal of effort to win others to their cause, only to make them worse than themselves.
 - The word used for "hell" is *gehenna*, the descriptive term for hell which refers to its character of decay and filth.
- D. The religious leaders are condemned for their deceitful conduct - Matthew 23:16-22
- The Pharisees had developed a complicated system of oath-taking in which it was possible for one to "legally lie." For example, if one swore by the temple, the oath was not binding, but if one swore by the gold of the temple, the oath was binding.
 - Christ attacks this by asking what is greater, the gold, or the temple that sets that gold apart as being holy to God.
 - This same concept is seen in the altar and the sacrifice. By swearing on the altar one could renege on his word, but by swearing on the sacrifice, one was bound. Christ asks what is greater, the altar, or the gift that sanctifies the altar. One's word is binding whether one swears by anything or not.

- This same issue is also handled in the Sermon on the Mount in which Christ affirms the binding nature of one's words.
- E. The religious leaders are condemned for their hypocrisy - Matthew 23:23-24
- The Pharisees were very careful to tithe herbs, but totally neglected justice, mercy, and faith. It is not that tithing is important, but the real heart of the law is not tithing but righteous behavior.
 - Christ illustrates this point by saying that the Pharisees were very careful to strain out gnats (the smallest of unclean animals), but swallowed whole camels (the largest of the unclean animals).
- F. The religious leaders are condemned for their extortion - Matthew 23:35-36
- Outwardly the Pharisees looked pretty good, but when one looked inside, their real nature of wickedness was evident. Christ compares them to a cup which looks clean on the outside, but is full of vileness on the inside.
- G. The religious leaders are condemned for their deceptive righteous conduct - Matthew 23:37-36
- Again Christ attacks the religious veneer of pioussity exhibited by the Pharisees by describing them as whitewashed tombs. Outwardly they look pretty, but inside they are full of rotting flesh and bones. Even so the Pharisees look good on the outside, but on the inside they are utterly evil and wicked.
 - Christ then condemns the double-standard of the Pharisees by pointing out that they were in the same tradition as their fathers. The fathers of the Pharisees were the ones that killed and tortured the prophets. Of course, no Pharisee would admit that they would have done the same. Unfortunately, a greater one than any of the prophets has arrived, and the only thing the Pharisees want to do is kill Him.

VI. Conclusion

Christ's conflict with the religious leaders of His day can be seen as a series of events which culminated in His crucifixion. The Pharisees and Scribes wanted Him dead because He exposed their hypocrisy. The Sadducees wanted Him dead because He upset the status-quo and threatened their pocketbooks. The Herodians wanted Him dead because He threatened the political stability of their position.

Ultimately, however, it was Satan who wanted Him dead because in killing Him Satan thought He would win. Fortunately, what appeared to be Satan's greatest victory was in fact the blow that bruised his head.